# Power and aggression: making sense of a fickle relationship

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*In Press*

Current Opinion in Psychology

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Abstract

'Power' and 'aggression' are two constructs that seem like a natural fit. After all, why should people in power not deploy aggression to get their way? Yet, when looking at empirical studies, the relationship between power and aggression is fickle at best. In an effort to integrate the literature, the present narrative review draws on a neuro-biological model of aggression as a framework, which distinguishes between three motivational mechanisms: offence, defence, and marking/display. High (*vs.* low) power likely facilitates offensive aggression and agonistic marking/display. However, high (*vs.* low) power often coincides with elevated status, which counters some of the detrimental effects of power. Meanwhile, defensive aggression is relatively under-researched, but may be a more frequent occurrence amongst lower power individuals and groups.

*Keywords*: Power, aggression, status, prestige, dominance

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## 1. Introduction

Stalin; Hitler; Ze Dong—memories of extremely powerful people can trigger memories of extreme aggression. The fact that *power* can be synonymous with *violence*, *brute*, or *force* is perhaps not a coincidence, and resonates with the popular belief that power 'corrupts' [1]. However, closer examination of the empirical evidence paints a complex, if not puzzling, picture of the relationship between power and aggression. While there is evidence that power fosters agonistic behaviour [2*], many studies find no direct link between power and aggression devoid of other moderating factors [3**,4,5,6,7**]. Adding to the conundrum, research shows that aggression is more likely to ensue when people are devoid of control [8] and feeling disadvantaged relative to others [9]—psychological states commonly associated with *low* power.

The aim of the present paper is to illuminate the fickle relationship between power and aggression by drawing on Adams' revised model of animal aggression as a framework [10]. The model distinguishes between three motivational mechanisms that are supported by distinct neuro-biological systems and characterised by distinct motor responses: offensive aggression, defensive aggression, and marking/display behaviour. This framework has appeal because the neuro-biological roots of aggression are relatively consistent across species, including our closest primate relatives [10], and because animal behaviour provides a useful perspective to understand social hierarchies in humans [11]. In what follows, I will discuss how different manifestations of rank and social influence in humans may modulate offensive aggression, defensive aggression, and marking/display behaviour. I will also touch briefly on sexual aggression as a specific facet of aggression, before turning to the moderating role of the socio-cultural setting.

## 2. Adams' Revised Model of Aggression

### 2.1. Offensive Aggression

Offensive aggression involves approach and attack, and tends to be triggered by competition over resources and/or frustration of ongoing activity [10]. In animals, offensive aggression is often directed at conspecifics that occupy a similar (*vs.* dissimilar) rank and thus could pose a threat to the aggressor's standing in a hierarchy [12]. This aligns with studies of human behaviour showing that powerholders are prone to aggression and abuse when their position is unstable [5,6], and when they perceive themselves to be ineffective and/or unable to influence others [3**]. Thus, the bulk of the evidence to date suggests that high (*vs.* low) power bolsters aggression, but only when power coincides with perceptions of threat and/or inefficacy; for example owing to the way power was gained (e.g., chance *vs.* merit) [6], the complexity of the task at hand [3**], and one's lack of experience with holding a powerful position [13].

As mentioned briefly, relative rank is an important determinant of aggression in non-human animals—more so than absolute rank [14]. Although systematic investigations of the link between relative rank and aggression in humans are relatively scant, the fact that aggression is less pronounced when there is a large disparity in power is reminiscent of the 'noblesse oblige' effect [15]. This effect is illustrated by Handgraaf and colleagues [16] who found that powerful allocators acted aggressively towards weaker opponents who had some retaliatory power, but completely powerless opponents were treated kindly. The work also exemplifies the critical role of competition as a factor that can determine if and to what extent power triggers offensive actions.

The formidability of the competitor is similarly consequential [17]. This was illustrated by a recent study examining how people respond to intimidating, persistent stares of onlookers. Participants moved away from staring onlookers that were taller and thus more

physically able to inflict costs, but they held their ground and even tended to approach staring onlookers that were shorter and thus less physically able to inflict costs [18].

Apart from competition and formidability, prestige—the extent to which people have qualities, possessions or roles that elicit admiration and respect—plays an important role because it provides a vehicle to exert control and influence without resorting to harsh influence tactics [19**,20]. Conversely, when people have low prestige and are disliked or disrespected, aggression becomes a means to exert control and also to regain a sense of social worth [9,21,22]. Note that the social psychological literature often uses the term *status* to denote how people rank in terms of their prestige, whereas power describes people's relative control over resources [23]. The same terminology is adopted here.

Studies show that the combination of high power and low status is particularly toxic. Fast and colleagues [4] manipulated power and status independently in an experiment. Participants were tasked with choosing activities that someone else (another alleged participant) had to complete in order to participate in a joint prize draw, thereby creating an element of competition. Participants exposed to both high power and low status chose more demeaning activities that were distressing, such as having to bark like a dog in front of an experimenter. This effect did not emerge when high power was combined with high status. Against the backdrop of these findings, it is perhaps not surprising that powerholders with low status often do not get on with their co-workers [24].

While low status can be detrimental, high status can be beneficial. For example boosting powerholders' sense of social worth reduces and indeed eliminates aggression tendencies in powerholders who lack competence [3**]. Status also interrupts the link between facial width-to-height ratio (a physical marker of dominance) and aggression [25].

Power and status are separate constructs, but not completely independent. Many roles that confer status also confer power and vice versa. Furthermore, status legitimises power and

is conducive to attaining power [*e.g.*, 26,27**]. Noting the interrelated nature of power and status, Weick and colleagues [7**] put forward a suppression model to describe the relationship between power, status and aggression. The authors observed a positive association between high (*vs.* low) power and aggression. This link was masked, however, by the association between power and status, which in turn buffered against aggression. This suppression pattern is consistent with work attesting to the toxic combination of high power and low status, but also points to elevated status as a potential evolved mechanism that counters offensive aggression in powerholders.

**2.2. Defensive Aggression**

Defensive aggression occurs when animals are attacked and respond with fight-and-flight or freezing. A flight response is more likely when an aggressor is deemed formidable, whereas a fight response is more likely when there is no escape or when there is a chance that the aggressor can be overcome. Adopting the biopsychosocial model as a framework [28], Scheepers and colleagues [29] examined low and high power individuals cardio-vascular responses to a stressful event. They found that low power promoted a psychophysiological threat response, whereas high power promoted a psychophysiological challenge response. The heightened state of threat observed in low power individuals when faced with a stressor could be seen as an indication that low power may facilitate defensive aggression. However, this inference is hampered by the fact that the hypothalamic pituitary-adrenal (HPA) system mediates the challenge and threat responses observed in Scheepers and colleagues' study, whereas fight-or-flight responses are triggered through activation in the sympathomedullary pathway (SAM) [28]. Other conceptual work has linked low power to an increased activation in the behavioural inhibition system (BIS) [30], but once again this system does not underpin fight-and-flight (and freeze) responses [31]. Further empirical studies are needed to determine

whether power modulates the sympathomedullary pathway (SAM) and thereby impacts defensive aggression.

Theoretically, if status correlates with power and counters offensive aggression in high power individuals, then instances of offensive and in particular defensive aggression may be more common amongst relatively low power individuals who do not have the benefit of an elevated status position. Since defensive aggression (*i.e.,* fight, as opposed to flight or freeze) is more likely when there is a chance that the aggressor can be overcome, power could still share a positive relationship with defensive aggression, but this effect may be confined to lower power individuals and groups. This would be consistent with the observation that violence is more common amongst deprived communities [32]. It also aligns with low status compensation theory, which argues that defensive aggression serves to protect and restore the sense of social worth of low ranking individuals [33].

**2.3. Marking / Display Behaviour**

Adams' framework distinguishes offensive aggression from marking (in rodents) and display (in primates) behaviours that have an agonistic element. In primates, dominance and submissive displays signal well-established dominance relationships [14]. For example, chimpanzees crouch and bow to signal submission, and adopt an erect posture and raise their body hair to signal dominance [34]. Corresponding behaviours in humans that convey dominance may include behaviours such as aggressive teasing, facial displays of anger, and rude or boisterous behaviour, all of which can be observed to a greater extent in high power compared to lower power individuals [30,35].

I have argued earlier that status counters offensive aggression in powerholders, so what about agonistic displays? Although high status individuals express more concerns for others compared to high power individuals [36], they are still perceived dominant [27**]. This could be because higher status individuals are overconfident [37] and noticeably aloof

when interacting with others [38]. Tost and colleagues [39] observed that people who had been formally allocated a high status role (leader) dominated a group discussion more than people without the formal high status role. Other studies show that high status individuals are more likely to infringe on other people's personal space in face-to-face conversations [40] and when driving a car [41]. Relatedly, Sell and colleagues [17] observed a positive association between status operationalised as attractiveness and anger proneness. Thus, while status may provide a protective layer in terms of buffering against offensive aggression tendencies, this layer may not be effective in countering agonistic displays. If true, this could explain the finding that leaders in organisations, occupying a high status role, were more likely to behave in a nasty or rude manner towards, and make fun of, work group members when they were primed with high power [2*].

## 3. Model Extensions

### 3.1. Sexual Aggression

The #MeToo movement has unveiled countless instances of powerholders abusing their position for sexual gratification. Can the model presented here also be applied to sexual aggression? This is speculative, but at least two modifications would have to be made. First, as noted earlier, in non-human primates offensive aggression is directed at conspecifics that occupy a similar (*vs.* dissimilar) rank, but the same does not apply to sexual aggression, which is perpetuated indiscriminately [42]. This would suggest that high power human perpetrators may not discriminate between powerless victims and victims with some means to retaliate (controlling for covariates such as the likelihood of contact). Secondly, sexual aggression is more likely to be perpetrated by males [*e.g.*,43], although gender differences may be stronger for some forms of sexual aggression (attack) than for others (display). This reasoning is based on studies showing that power can promote sexual assertiveness and an increased desire for sadomasochism in both sexes [44,45]. Those modifications aside,

evidence that feelings of incompetence predict men's sexual harassment of female subordinates [46] and that low-powered men resort to sexual aggression when given power [47] are consistent with the model presented here.

### 3.2. Socio-Cultural Context

Power relations and aggressive behaviours are embedded in, and modulated by, the socio-cultural context. For example, studies conducted in Anglo-American cultural settings show that salient social norms can compel powerholders to be ethical [48] and even submissive [49]. Other work indicates that overt and subtle forms of downward aggression are descriptively and prescriptively more normative in high (*vs.* low) power distance cultural settings [50,51]. Similarly, country-level differences in homicides suggest that offensive and defensive aggression are generally more prevalent in high (*vs.* low) power distance cultures [52]. Furthermore, high status averts aggression in Anglo-American cultural settings, but boosts aggression aimed at establishing social order in Asian cultural settings [53]. In a similar vein, norm violation serves to signal power in individualistic cultural settings, but not in collective cultural settings [54]. Thus, although the model presented here can hopefully provide a useful novel perspective, the model cannot be applied blindly without due consideration of the socio-cultural context.

## 4. Summary and Conclusion

The aim of the present narrative review was to apply Adams' framework to the literature on power. The resulting (simplified) model is depicted in Figure 1. As can be seen, power is likely conducive to offensive aggression, but elevated status counters these detrimental effects. On the other hand, status may not prevent the occurrence of agonistic verbal and non-verbal displays in powerholders, which could explain the results of studies that have found a direct link between power and less direct forms of aggression. Lastly, defensive aggression may be a more frequent occurrence amongst relatively lower power

individuals and groups who do not enjoy the benefits of elevated status, although this relationship is somewhat complicated by the fact that power also increases the likelihood of fight (*vs.* flight or freeze).

Further studies are needed to support or refute predictions arising from the model presented here, which could be usefully extended to other forms of aggression such as inter-group hostility, and to the flipside of aggression: bonding and cooperation [14]. In closing, the present review illustrates how valuable insights can be gained by drawing on animal models of aggression, not least because the models encourage us to look beyond 'aggression' and 'power' as uniform constructs.

**Acknowledgements**

The author wishes to thank Georgia Pennington and Milica Vasiljevic for assisting with the preparation of the manuscript, and the editors for providing insightful comments on an earlier version of the manuscript.

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A 10-day diary study carried out with +100 leaders enrolled in an executive MBA. On days when primed with power, participants report being more rude and derogatory towards their workers, who respond in kind causing frictions and stress. A within-subjects manipulation of power provides the icing on the cake.

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Across four studies, Fast and colleagues find that power relates to aggression when power coincides with a lack of perceived competence. Self-affirmation manipulations counter these effects. Note the consistent absence of a main effect of power across studies. A must-read for anyone interested in power and aggression.

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Builds on previous studies that have shown that the combination of high power and low status / worth is particularly toxic. Develops this into a suppression model given that power and status are independent but correlated constructs. Study 2 combines primary with secondary data gleaned from Anicich et al., 2016 [see reference 24].

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Shows that both prestige and dominance independently predict how much people influence others (subjectively and objectively; Study 1) and how much attention they command (Study 2) in a group task setting. A go-to paper for research methods, and for the conceptual discussion and analysis.

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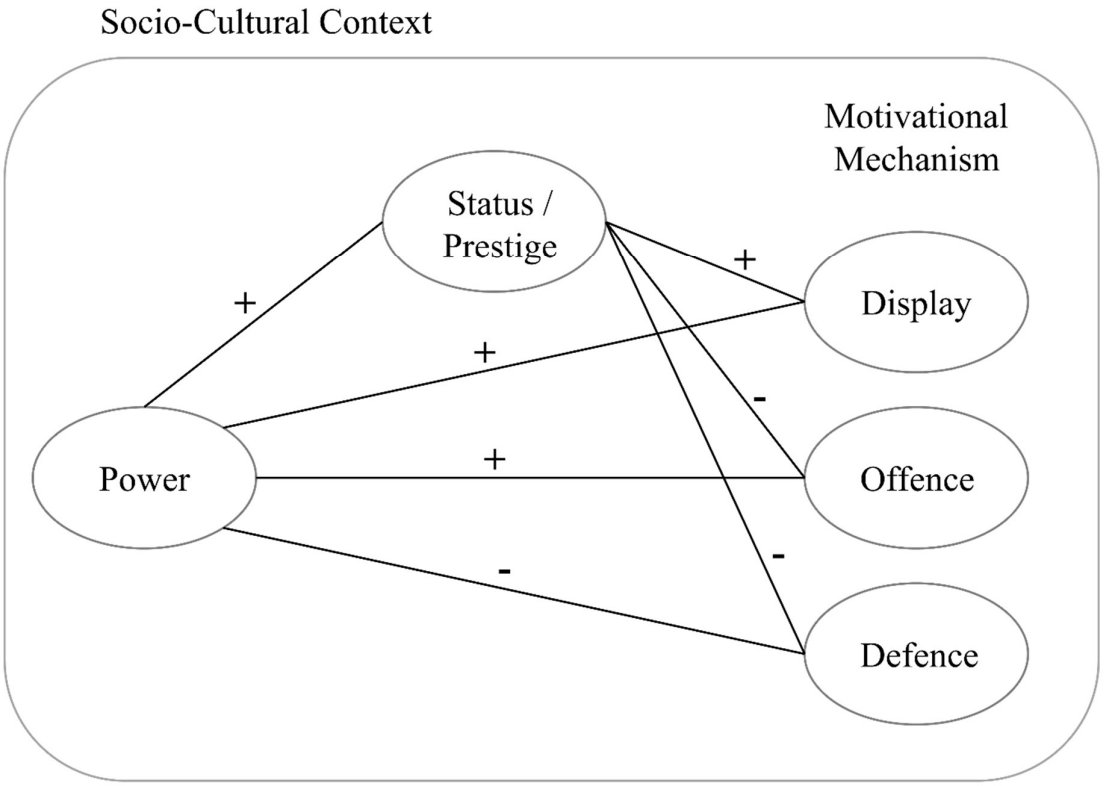
Figure Caption

*Figure 1*. Conceptual (simplified) model of the link between power, status / prestige, and motivational mechanisms underlying different manifestations of aggression. See text for a more nuanced discussion.


Socio-Cultural Context
Motivational Mechanism
Status / Prestige
Power
Display
Offence
Defence
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